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Our town--Salinas,
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Our Town-- Salinas, California

Part I: The First Fifty Years

They called the place Salinas, which means "salt marshes," but it was more than that. Oh sure, the place where Elias Howe stopped to fix his broken-down wagon in 1856 was a maze of sloughs and shallow ponds, but it was also a place where a man could find land upon which to graze his cattle, a place to plant some grain, and a place of transition between the heat of the golden land to the east and south and the cool gray fog to the west. And Howe figured it was also a place where a man could establish a tavern, a "Half Way House," as he called it, to refresh other weary travelers as they traversed the dusty "El Camino Real." It was a place where not only he, but other men could put down roots; and so they did. It was, moreover, a place where its later designated colors of green and gold were appropriately and appreciatively evident.

When the state of California was admitted to the Union on September 9, 1850 the place where "Salinas City" was chartered just twenty-four years later also became part of the Monterey County, one of the state's twenty-seven original counties. For a time, however, from the later end of the Gold Rush era until Elias Howe erected the first town building, the place was informally called "Hilltown" even though there was no hill and there certainly was no town. Actually, the name derived from one of the few landowners in the area, a Mr. James Hill. From a population of 599 in 1870, the town had grown to 1,865 in 1880 with two elementary schools and seven teachers, a half-dozen churches, a flour mill, brewery, foundry, railroad and several general merchandise establishments. In 1879 Robert Louis Stevenson described the sleepy cattle town as "a town of purely American character, mostly of Protestant denomination"--and so it remained for at least the next forty years.

Between its founding in 1874 and the turn of the century the town continued to grow around the industries of grain farming and dairy farming and the raising of long-horned beef cattle which had been introduced by the mission fathers many years before. During these years as the town became established a number of fine victorian-style homes were erected in Salinas City that stand today as showpieces for the community. Keeping pace with the rest of the country, electricity for power and light came to

the town in 1888 and the telephone in 1896. The year 1888 also saw four bridges over the Salinas River. A major business venture by Claus Spreckels was the establishment, in 1899, of the Spreckels Sugar Factory west of town. Along with it came a colony of German immigrants,named St. Joseph's Colony, which became a company town which they called Spreckels, adjacent to the factory.

The year 1900 not only marked the beginning of a new century for the 3,304 residents of Salinas City (the name was changed in 1919 to "Salinas") but also the designation of Salinas being a major stop on the new Southern Pacific Railroad run from Los Angeles to San Fransisco. The year also saw the opening of a new three-story brick high school building for Salinas High School on the corner of Alisal and Church Streets. The school had begun eighteen years earlier, in 1882, and by 1894 had developed into a full four-year high school.

The first two decades of the Twentieth Century were periods of slow growth in the area. The town's principal industries, besides the general merchandise stores and the saloons, were the Sperry Flour Company, several blacksmith shops and a cigar factory. Dairy farming was the main agricultural interest although grain, beans, and sugar beets for the Spreckels factory were also farmed. A few years before the turn of the century the generosity of one of the local citizens, Eugene Sherwood, provided for Salinas 60-80 acres of land at the northern edge of the town. It was to become a recreation area for public use provided, said Sherwood, a fair be held on it annually. This was the genesis of a major activity around which the community later became "put on the map." Instead of a fair, the land was regularly used for horse racing out of which activity and facility the California Rodeo grounds grew. The Rodeo itself actually began between the years 1909 and 1911 with its incorporation date being 1913. With an attendance of 4,000 for the "Big Week" of 1912 to 35,000 for the 1929 event,it was clear that the California Rodeo was destined to become Salinas' major social attraction. The year 1930 even saw the appearance at the rodeo of the great American folk hero, Will Rogers. At the time of this writing (1987) it has become recognized as one of the "big four" rodeos in the world.

Other social functions in the early years of the century focused at the Salinas Opera House. It housed conventions, travelling stock shows, and local theater. Nationally known composer-director John Phillip Souza

played there three times, much to the delight of local residents.

Another event which was to bring significant changes to the sleepy town was one which lasted only sixty-one seconds in the early morning hours of April 18, 1906. The great earthquake for which San Fransisco is so well-noted also hit Salinas. Although no one was killed or injured a great deal of damage occurred. The local newspaper reported:

> "Never in its history has Salinas been so terribly moved and excited as on early Wednesday morning. . . . Never was seen such a chaotic ruinous look to its Main Street. Frightened people ran from their residences clad in sleeping garments while the ground writhes (sic) like a giant snake" (*Salinas Index*, 20 April 1906).

All communications were cut, train lines severed, and the bridges all declared unsafe for use. It was reported that Moss Landing suffered extensive damage from a tidal wave which destroyed the long wharf and washed away all the produce stored there waiting for shipment. The town coped, as it had in other catastrophies, and the schools reopened the following Monday. If it hadn't been known before, it became immediatly apparent that Salinas was located on one of the most active earthquake areas in the world.

One other significant occurrence which later would have enormous impact upon the economy of Salinas was the introduction, in 1915, of four acres of lettuce to the deep alluvial flood plain soil and temperate climate of the valley. Within fifty years over 48,000 acres would annually be planted yielding over $50 million to the local economy. Lettuce, along with other row crops, would earn for Salinas and the long valley in which it is located the reputation in the middle half of the 20th century of being the "Salad Bowl of the Nation." The county was reported a half-century later as being "the leading vegetable producing county in the U.S." Economically, in 1975, the five leading crops in the county were, (1) lettuce, worth $118,765,000; (2) cattle, $52,140,000; (3) broccoli, $19,411,000; (4) strawberries; and (5) celery. By 1984 the total crop value for the county exceeded the one billion dollar mark.

Part II: The Town Becomes a City

The decade 1920-1930 saw the community move forward in a number of major ways. With a 1920 population of 4,308 the city jumped to 10,263 by 1930. Perhaps as a portent of what was to come was the election, in 1919, of a local teenage boy by the name of John Steinbeck to the office of Senior Class President of Salinas High School. By the end of the decade of the '30s his novels had focused the attention of the nation on Salinas and other local areas about which he wrote. Internationally recognized for his insights into the human character and the skill with which he wove them into the fabric of his books, he became Salinas' most famous native son and the recipient of the Nobel and Pulitzer prizes for literature. The Salinas Public Library was renamed the John Steinbeck Library in his honor shortly after his death in 1968.

The decade of the 1920's saw Salinas make numerous civic improvements: a new firehouse, airport (it began operation in 1929 as a "public airplane landing base"), post office, water tower, sewage system, city park improvements, a grandstand at the Rodeo Grounds, and city zoning. In 1920 the Salinas Union High School Board of Trustees created the Salinas Junior college which was housed in part of the new high school building on South Main Street which also opened that year. Sixteen years later the college moved to its present location on Homestead Avenue. The name was changed to Hartnell College in 1948 in honor of William E. P. Hartnell who founded, in 1884, the first "secular" college in California--El Colegio de San Jose, founded on Alisal Creek in what is now the Alisal district of Salinas.

Nineteen twenty-one is recognized as the year of the beginning of the agricultural revolution in the Salinas Valley. Lettuce began to supplant sugar beets as the major crop of the valley. It required large crews of "stoop labor," who, at the time were primarily Filipino men who had moved into the area at the end of the first decade of the new century. Another agricultural/manufacturing industry which took hold, for a time in the late '20s and early '30s was the rubber plantations of low-lying guayule bushes.

Developments in the 1930's included numerous public work projects including the new $500,000 courthouse (1936-39), the Fire Department House (1939), a new $100,000 Post Office, a tubercular ward being added,

in 1936, to the County Hospital, and work on an expanded airport with lengthened runways, another hanger, weather station and beacon. The new Salinas Junior College campus was located on 15 acres of land on Homestead Drive and cost $265,000. Also built was the new Armory, and the Washington Junior High School which was dedicated in 1937.

Significant in the history of the community in the 1930's was the settlement of the "Alisal" by midwesternn emigrants who had fled the "dust bowl" region of the central U.S. This area, on the east border of the town of Salinas, was so named because the land was part of the old Rancho El Sausal. Alisal, incidently, came from the Spanish "aliso," which means alder tree or sometimes sycamore tree. This settlement of some 6,000 "Okies," as the newcomers were called (the area was first called "Little Oklahoma"), developed an identity and solidarity apart from the older Salinas residents and thereby, for many years, some social and economic isolation.

Increased agricultural production (the annual lettuce yield in the 1930's was 500,000,000 heads of lettuce), the impact of the great depression, and the need for cheap labor all combined to culminate in a series of labor strikes and violence in Salinas in the mid-'30s as attempts were made to unionize migratory field workers (some 4,500 pickers) and packing shed employees. Wages were $0.60-.80 an hour for the packing shed employees during this era. The biggest conflagration occurred in 1936 with bitter and violent strikes and tensions very high. Experiences of people such as these throughout California were brought into sharp focus with Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939.

The decade of the 1940's was really two eras--1939-1945 and the post-war years of 1945-1950. During the early years of the decade of the '40s, and in response to the demands of U.S. involvement in the war, the Salinas airport was designated as a U.S. Army Air Corps base with barracks built to accomodate the personnel stationed there. That same year the two separate Army camps of Camp Ord, located on the bluffs above the Salinas River, and Camp Clayton on the coast, combined to become Fort Ord, a major military establishment.

The land also made its contribution to the war effort. Military needs precipitated the magnesium operation seen today as the white scar on the mountainside at Natividad, north-east of Salinas. Dolomite was used in the construction of bombs and the planes that dropped them. After the war,

the dolomite was used for a variety of other products, from fertilizer to bricks.

The biggest contribution that Salinas made was that of the human element. The war in the Pacific had a major impact on the lives of a number of Salinas families; sadly, the impact was tragic. Company C of the 194th Battalion of the California National Guard sent 107 young men from the community to Corregidor and Bataan in the Philippines. Only 46 men survived the fighting. Thirty-three of the veterans participated in an Army Day Parade on Main Street, Salinas in April 1946 and were honored by the citizenry of the community.

Though happy to see the war end, Salinas did not experience a return to the "good old days." John Steinbeck, for one, did not return, claiming that a good deal of resentment had built up around him. Feelings between farm labor and growers also remained tenuous. The rapid growth from 1945-1950, especially in the south, or "Valley Center," area of town, was also met with some major birthing pains. Nevertheless, annexation of land adjacent to the city increased its area to 3.7 miles by 1947, and by 1950 the city limits sign was moved 1.2 miles farther to the north and announced a population of 13,512. Efforts in 1950 to annex the Alisal District failed as voters from "east of Salinas" chose to remain independent. It was another thirteen years before the district finally chose to "come in" to the city in 1963. Numerous other civic efforts in 1949-50 met with success, however, as airport and Rodeo subdivision tracts were annexed and a number of proposals, such as the building of the municipal swimming pool, passed and were funded by the City Council. In 1949 a $2 million bond issue was passed to provide funds for the new 133 bed Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital. Construction began on the hospital in 1951.

Climate has been mentioned as one of the fundamental reasons why Salinas and its surrounding areas have prospered, but the vagaries of weather, which make up the climate, has occasionally provided some of its greatest challenges. Periodic droughts and floods have plagued the farming and ranching industries of the area from the beginning. Farmers and all living things suffered greatly in the droughts of 1876-77 (only 4.4 inches of rainfall), 1912-13, 1923-24, 1971-72, and the 1975-76, 1977-78 years which had only 7.38 and 8.02 inches respectively for the dryest two consecutive years on record.

At the other extreme, flooding of the Salinas River prior to the completion of the Nacimiento Dam in 1963 and the San Antonio Dam in 1966 on a number of occasions caused extensive farmland and property damage. Interestingly enough, during most of the year water carried by this "upsidedown river" flows underground (it is said to be the largest "submerged river in America"); but when heavy concentrations of rainfall occur in the Santa Lucias the riverbanks have repeatedly proven to be insufficient to contain the flow. In the past half-century the well-remembered Christmas floods of 1955-56 came about as the result of a nine inch deluge of rain in December of '55 which caused the flooding of thousands of acres of farmland and the temporary expansion of the river even into the city of Salinas. The dams of the South County proved their effectiveness in forstalling an even worse disaster in January and February of 1969 when, notwithstanding their water containment contributions, between 15,000 and 16,000 acres of Valley farmland were inundated and the Valley Center area of Salinas was sandbagged as a precaution to keep water out of the residental areas of the city. Officials estimated that had the dams not been in place, the city center would have been under three feet of water. Most recently, Salinas experienced one of its wettest years on record with the 1982-83 rain season totaling over 23 inches of rainfall, which was almost twice the yearly average of 13.60 inches. Surrounding mountains, especially to the west, were deluged with much more rain--a reported 173 inches fell on Mining Ridge in the Santa Lucia range which one official said may have been the wettest place in the nation that year.

Other vagaries of weather have provided local residents with the novelty of an occasional snowfall, the most noteworthy of which in the past thirty years occurred in 1957 and 1962. The lowest recorded temperature in Salinas was 20 degrees fahrenheit in January of 1949 and the highest 103 in September of the same year. But most of the time the climate of Salinas has been very temperate and mild with an average mean difference of only 14 degrees fahrenheit between the warmest month, September, and the coldest, January. The monthly mean temperature is 57.2 degrees fahrenheit (determined from an average daily high of 68.2 and an average daily low of 46.1). The average growing season this century has been 262 days (determined by finding the first average frost day in the fall and the last average frost in the spring and excluding the days in

between). Perhaps the rarest twist of weather occurred on the morning of April 3, 1987 as a tornado touched down in North Salinas doing an estimated half-million dollars damage to sixteen flower greenhouses.

Commerce in Salinas experienced a major boost in the early 1950's with the establishment of new concept in retail sales--the shopping center. The new Valley Center shopping center in south Salinas became the retail hub of the county with 62 retail outlets. Patronage came from all the Central Coast communities within driving distance of Salinas. A little over twenty years later, the Northridge Regional Shopping Center, an investment of over $14 million, opened in North Salinas and has enjoyed the same type of commercial success as did the its predecessor in South Salinas. The Northridge mall was doubled in size in 1981 and by 1986 reported 120 specialty shops and four major department stores.

Industry in Salinas for many years had centered around agri-business. By the 1960's other businesses found Salinas an attractive place to settle. During the decade of the '60's the massive Firestone Tire and Rubber plant had opened along with other major plants owned by Peter Paul Cadbury, Nestle, Shilling, and J.M. Smucker companies. Besides the Monterey County government, which, in 1978 employeed 2000 workers, the Firestone plant was the largest private employer in the county, employing 1800 workers in the same year. The Federal Government became a large employeer (600 employees) in 1977 with the opening of its Social Security Administration's national data center in North Salinas. Only three years later, with the economic recession of 1980, the Firestone plant closed and the next year the came the announcement of the closing of Peter Paul Cadbury Company and the closing of the seventy-nine year old sugar beet processing plant owned by the Spreckels Sugar Company. Fortunately, a quick economic recovery came about in 1981 with agricultural profits showing a significant rebound and the previously mentioned doubling of the size of the Northridge mall.

One of the most difficult problems faced by the burgeoning community has been and promises to be in the future, a lack of sufficient low-income housing. The need has been exacerbated since the mid-1960's with the influx of families of Mexican origin who, historically, have generally been among the lower-paid segment of the community. The dramatic shift in ethnic composition and the needs of this large group of people can be seen even in comparing the 1976 census figures with 1980 figures released by

the city government: In 1976 Salinas had a 63.2% white population and a 27.1% Mexican-American population; the 1980 figures showed 52% white and 38.1% Mexican-American. The trend state-wide predicts that the 1987 figures of 20% Mexican-Americans in the state will grow to 47% by the year 2000.

Besides the Rodeo and related "Big Week" activities, Salinas residents have enjoyed a number of other recreational spectator attractions since becoming firmly established as the major agri-business community of the Central Coast. Semi-professional football was played in the community as early as 1936 and again in 1958 and 1959, and professional baseball made an entry in the late 1940's with the *Packers* then the *Angels* and most recently the *Spurs* baseball clubs. High school and Hartnell College athletics has also consistently proved popular with the community. In 1981 the first annual California International Air Show attracted an estimated 60,000 people to see the Blue Angels and other aerial performers. To accomodate people in a more participatory way, the Monterey County Park system which began in 1966 established two fine parks in the local area--the 122 acre Royal Oaks Park in the Prunedale area, and the 5,000 acre Toro Regional Park on Highway 68, just six miles from Salinas. In 1975 the Salinas Y.M.C.A. opened its new Fitness Center for the very active. Two excellent performing arts facilities enriched the social and cultural life of Salinas in the mid-1970's, the Hartnell College Performing Arts Center which was dedicated in 1974, and the beautiful Salinas Community Center located among the trees of Sherwood Park which opened in 1976. The Hartnell facility has featured *Western Stage* which has offered a full spectrum of stage productions, from classical to contemporary comedy and drama.

Perhaps the biggest focused event of the past half-century occurred in 1974 with the Salinas Centennial celebration. Activities in the five-month celebration included a theatrical production, "Lightnin,'" a City Festival of the Arts, displays in the Steinbeck Library, decorated store windows, a parade, special 4th of July observances and the minting of a special Centennial medallion. Chaired by Robert Johnston, it was a splendid community celebration.

Salinas has had a colorful history and shows promise for a prosperous future. It has had a stable record of growth and has been well-managed by

its City-Council form of government. Growth has not been its only concern. Although growth has been steady, and for the past quarter-century has been greater than the state-wide average, services to its citizenry have generally kept pace. The quality of life of its citizens has always been a fundamental consideration in local government's planning and execution. The opportunities for a rich lifestyle with clean air and water, numerous educational, social, recreational and service opportunities and what has been called an "inflation-proof economy," have made Salinas an attractive place to live.

Ronald F. Miller
April, 1987

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